

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF FINAL BILL ANALYSIS

BILL #: CS/CS/HB 1105 Child Welfare

SPONSOR(S): Health & Human Services Committee and Children, Families & Seniors Subcommittee, Tomkow and others

TIED BILLS: **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:**

FINAL HOUSE FLOOR ACTION:	118 Y's	0 N's	GOVERNOR'S ACTION:	Pending
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SUMMARY ANALYSIS

CS/CS/HB 1105 passed the House on March 9, 2020, as amended, and subsequently passed the Senate on March 12, 2020.

Chapter 39, F.S., creates the dependency system administered by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF works in partnership with local communities and the courts to ensure the safety, timely permanency and well-being of children involved in the dependency process. CS/CS/HB 1105 makes various changes to this system to better balance placement stability with child safety and permanency.

The bill requires certain training for dependency court judges on the benefits of stable placements and related issues, and requires judges to consider certain factors related to placement stability when determining whether to change a child's placement. It also requires DCF to notify judges of all central abuse hotline reports that are accepted for an investigation involving a child over whom the court has jurisdiction.

The bill authorizes DCF to file a petition to initiate court oversight when a family is receiving services from a community-based care lead agency (CBC) without court involvement, if the parent has been receiving voluntary services. It also prohibits the court from ending jurisdiction if a CBC has to continue to provide an in-home safety plan for a child to live at home.

The bill requires the court and case management to monitor interactions between foster parents and biological parents to encourage a productive working relationship that includes meaningful communication and mutual support. The bill makes current law requirements for quality parenting applicable to all out-of-home caregivers, instead of only to foster parents.

The bill creates a process with set timeframes for DCF and its subcontractors to follow when a person seeks to adopt a child from the child welfare system. It also requires DCF or its subcontractors to complete criminal history checks, preliminary home studies for adoptive minors and licensing studies for family foster homes within specific timeframes.

The bill authorizes circuit courts to create early childhood court programs, specifying factors to consider when doing so. It requires the Office of State Courts Administrator to contract for an evaluation of the programs to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity to evidence-based treatment.

Further, the bill allows a CBC to demonstrate a justification of need to provide more than 35 percent of direct care services to children and families in its geographic service area.

The bill has an indeterminate, insignificant, negative impact on the court system, and no impact on local government.

Subject to the Governor's veto powers, the effective date of this bill is July 1, 2020.

I. SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION

A. EFFECT OF CHANGES:

Background

Florida's Child Welfare System

Chapter 39, F.S., creates the dependency system charged with protecting child welfare. Florida's child welfare system identifies children and families in need of services through reports to the central abuse hotline (hotline) and child protective investigations. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) administers the state's child welfare system and works in partnership with local communities and the courts to ensure the safety, timely permanency and well-being of children involved in the dependency process.¹ If the problems cannot be addressed, the child welfare system finds safe out-of-home placements for these children.

DCF's child welfare practice model focuses on preserving and strengthening the child's family ties whenever possible, and removing the child from the home when the child's welfare cannot be adequately safeguarded otherwise.²

Community-Based Care Organizations and Services

DCF contracts for case management, out-of-home care, and related services with community-based care lead agencies (CBCs). Using CBCs to provide child welfare services is designed to increase local community ownership of service delivery and design.³ DCF, through CBCs, administers a system of care for children with the goals of:

- Prevention of separation of children from their families;
- Intervention to allow children to remain safely in their own homes;
- Reunification of families who have had children removed from their care;
- Safety for children who are separated from their families;
- Well-being of children through emphasis on educational stability and timely health care;
- Achievement of permanency; and
- Effective transition to independence and self-sufficiency.

CBCs provide foster care and related services, including, but not limited to, counseling, domestic violence services, substance abuse services, family preservation, emergency shelter, and adoption.⁴ CBCs contract with a number of subcontractors for case management and direct care services to children and their families.⁵ There are 17 CBCs statewide, which together serve the state's 20 judicial circuits.⁶

However, CBCs contract with various organizations to provide direct care services to children and families, and may also provide such services themselves. A CBC is statutorily prohibited from directly providing more than 35 percent of all child welfare services in the circuit it services.⁷

Dependency Court

¹ S. 39.001, F.S.

² S. 39.001(4), F.S.

³ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Community-Based Care*, <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/community-based-care/> (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

⁴ S. 409.145(1), F.S.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Community-Based Care Lead Agency Map*, <http://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/community-based-care/cbc-map> (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

⁷ S. 409.988(1)(j), F.S.

A dependency court judge must act in the child's best interest when presiding over a dependency case governed by Ch. 39, F.S. In doing this, the judge considers a number of factors, known as the child's best interest factors, throughout various stages of the dependency court process. Chapter 63, F.S., relating to adoptions, and s. 409.145, F.S., relating to reasonable and prudent parenting, outlines specific factors for the judge to consider when determining what is in the child's best interest. However, Ch. 39, F.S., does not provide factors or guidance on what a dependency court judge should consider when determining what is in the child's best interest.

The Dependency Court Process

Dependency Proceeding	Description of Process	Controlling Statute
Removal	A child protective investigation determines the child's home is unsafe, and the child is removed.	s. 39.401, F.S.
Shelter Hearing	A shelter hearing occurs within 24 hours after removal. The judge determines whether to keep the child out-of-home.	s. 39.401, F.S.
Petition for Dependency	A petition for dependency occurs within 21 days of the shelter hearing. This petition seeks to find the child dependent.	s. 39.501, F.S.
Arraignment Hearing and Shelter Review	An arraignment and shelter review occurs within 28 days of the shelter hearing. This allows the parent to admit, deny, or consent to the allegations within the petition for dependency and allows the court to review any shelter placement.	s. 39.506, F.S.
Adjudicatory Trial	An adjudicatory trial is held within 30 days of arraignment. The judge determines whether a child is dependent during trial.	s. 39.507, F.S.
Disposition Hearing	If the child is found dependent, disposition occurs within 15 days of arraignment or 30 days of adjudication. The judge reviews the case plan and placement of the child. The judge orders the case plan for the family and the appropriate placement of the child.	s. 39.506, F.S. s. 39.521, F.S.
Postdisposition Hearing	The court may change temporary placement at a postdisposition hearing any time after disposition but before the child is residing in the permanent placement approved at a permanency hearing.	s. 39.522, F.S.
Judicial Review Hearings	The court must review the case plan and placement every 6 months, or upon motion of a party.	s. 39.701, F.S.
Petition for Termination of Parental Rights	Once the child has been out-of-home for 12 months, if DCF determines that reunification is no longer a viable goal, termination of parental rights is in the best interest of the child, and other requirements are met, a petition for termination of parental rights is filed.	s. 39.802, F.S. s. 39.8055, F.S. s. 39.806, F.S. s. 39.810, F.S.
Advisory Hearing	This hearing is set as soon as possible after all parties have been served with the petition for termination of parental rights. The hearing allows the parent to admit, deny, or consent to the allegations within the petition for termination of parental rights.	s. 39.808, F.S.
Adjudicatory Hearing	An adjudicatory trial shall be set within 45 days after the advisory hearing. The judge determines whether to terminate parental rights to the child at this trial.	s. 39.809, F.S.

Training for Dependency Court Judges

Currently 114 judges and 31 magistrates throughout the state hear dependency court cases.⁸ All judges new to the bench are required to complete the Florida Judicial College program during their first year of judicial service following selection to the bench.⁹ The Florida Court Education Council¹⁰

⁸ Email from J. Blair Williams, Senior Court Analyst II, Office of State Courts Administrator, RE: Information Requested on Call Today 1/3/19 (Jan. 13, 2020) on file with Children, Families, and Seniors Subcommittee staff.

⁹ S. 25.385, F.S. See Florida Courts, *Information for New Judges*, <https://www.flcourts.org/Resources-Services/Judiciary-Education/Information-for-New-Judges> (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

¹⁰ Established in 1978, the Florida Court Education Council is charged with coordinating and overseeing the creation and maintenance of a comprehensive education program and making budgetary, programmatic, and policy recommendations to the court regarding

sponsors the 10-day program, which provides general court information as well as information on substantive and procedural matters, including some training on the dependency court process and how to consider a child's best interest.¹¹ However, this program is only for judges new to the bench, and is not required for existing judges rotating to the dependency bench. Judges are also required to earn a minimum of 30 approved credit hours of continuing judicial education every three years.¹² Although training is available on dependency topics, the only training statutorily mandated to be offered is for judges who have responsibility for domestic violence cases.¹³

Early Childhood Courts

An early childhood court addresses child welfare cases for children typically under the age of three and provides a different approach to addressing issues causing the child's dependency than the traditional dependency court process. An early childhood court is a "problem-solving court"¹⁴ and attempts to address root causes of an individual's involvement with the justice system through specialized dockets, multidisciplinary teams, and a nonadversarial approach.¹⁵

Florida's early childhood courts emerged in 2014, and there are currently 24 statewide in 14 judicial circuits. The Office of State Courts Administrator (OSCA) coordinates Florida's early childhood courts with a goal of improving child safety and well-being; healing trauma and repairing the parent-child relationship; promoting timely permanency; and stopping the intergenerational cycle of maltreatment.¹⁶ Families served by an early childhood court receive comprehensive services through the court, a local community coordinator, and team of other stakeholders.¹⁷ The multidisciplinary team approach to dependency court requires frequent case consultation, including monthly team meetings and judicial hearings.¹⁸

Early childhood courts include a multidisciplinary team typically made up of child welfare attorneys, parents' attorneys, guardian ad litem attorneys and volunteers, child protective investigators, parents, caregivers, an infant-mental health specialist, and a community coordinator. A full-time community coordinator works for each early childhood court and serves as a liaison between all the professional roles in a child's case. A community coordinator also coordinates services across providers and schedules and organizes family meetings, where the multidisciplinary team reviews the family's progress and prepares for monthly hearings.

Early childhood courts also feature an experienced mental health provider with specialized skills and training in early childhood development, attachment, and trauma. The infant mental health specialist works with families and recommends therapeutic interventions.

The Legislature appropriated \$11.3 million (\$10,837,527 in recurring general revenue and \$452,313 in nonrecurring general revenue) to the Office of the States Administrator in Fiscal Year 2019-2020 for

continuing education. See Florida Office of State Courts Administrator, *Short History of Florida State Court System, Processes, Programs, and Initiatives*, (2016), https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/216626/1965702/Short-History_2016.pdf (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

¹¹ Florida Office of State Courts Administrator, *Short History of Florida State Court System, Processes, Programs, and Initiatives*, (2016), https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/216626/1965702/Short-History_2016.pdf (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ S. 25.385, F.S.

¹⁴ Florida Courts, Office of Court Improvement, Problem Solving Courts, <https://www.flcourts.org/Resources-Services/Court-Improvement/Problem-Solving-Courts> (last visited Feb. 18, 2020).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Florida Institute of Child Welfare, 2018-2019 Early Childhood Court Evaluation, https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/543347/6122573/ECC_one_pager_2018_2019_final.pdf (last visited Feb. 19, 2020).

¹⁸ *Id.*

Florida's problem-solving courts, which includes early childhood courts.¹⁹ The Trial Court Budget Commission determines the allocation of those funds to the participating circuits.

Judicial circuits can decide whether to implement an early childhood court program; there is no statutory requirement for judicial circuits to have one. Community stakeholders interested in implementing an early childhood court program in their judicial circuit work with community partners and a judge or magistrate who will implement the program in the court room. Courts may work with OSCA to provide training and education for multidisciplinary problem-solving court team members to gain up-to-date knowledge on best practices. Although the Florida Supreme Court adopted the Early Childhood Court Best Practice Standards in November 2019,²⁰ there is currently no statutory guidance for statewide consistency of early childhood court programs.

Dependency System Process

When a child is in danger of, or has suffered from, abuse, abandonment or neglect, the dependency system is set up to protect the child's welfare. The dependency process includes, among other things:

- A report to the central abuse hotline (hotline);
- A child protective investigation to determine the safety of the child;
- The court finding the child dependent;
- Case planning to address the problems resulting in the child's dependency; and
- Reunification with the child's parent or another option to establish permanency, such as adoption.

Central Abuse Hotline

DCF operates the Florida central abuse hotline (hotline), which accepts reports 24 hours a day, seven days a week, of known or suspected child abuse, abandonment or neglect.²¹ Statute mandates any person who knows or suspects that a child is abused, abandoned, or neglected to report such knowledge or suspicion to the hotline.²² A child protective investigation begins if the hotline determines the allegations meet the statutory definition of abuse, abandonment or neglect.²³ A child protective investigator either verifies,²⁴ does not substantiate,²⁵ or finds no indicators of abuse or neglect after a child protective investigation.²⁶

When the hotline receives a call regarding possible abuse, abandonment or neglect, the hotline counselor researches the child welfare information system to determine if the child or family is currently involved with the child welfare system.²⁷ If so, the child protective investigator notifies the child's case manager and DCF's attorney of the report.²⁸ Currently, case managers and DCF attorneys are only

¹⁹ 2019, SB 2500, General Appropriations Act, specific appropriation 3247 is provided for treatment services, drug testing, case management, and ancillary services for participants in problem-solving courts, including, but not limited to, adult drug courts, juvenile drug courts, family dependency drug courts, early childhood courts, mental health courts, and veterans courts.

²⁰ Florida Supreme Court, Florida Early Childhood Court Best Practice Standards (Nov. 2019), https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/544125/6131580/Early_Childhood_Court_Best_Practice_Standards.pdf (last visited Apr. 3, 2020).

²¹ S. 39.201(5), F.S.

²² S. 39.201(1)(a), F.S.

²³ S. 39.201(2)(a), F.S.

²⁴ "Verified" findings are when a preponderance the evidence results in a determination the specific harm or threat of harm was the result of abuse, abandonment or neglect. These findings require the investigator to take action to protect the child. See Florida Department of Children and Families, CF Operating Procedure No. 170-5.

²⁵ "Not substantiated" findings result from an investigation when there is credible evidence which does not meet the standard or being a preponderance to support that the specific harm was the result of abuse, abandonment, or neglect. See Florida Department of Children and Families, CF Operating Procedure No. 170-5.

²⁶ "No indicators" findings result when there is no credible evidence to support the allegations of abuse, abandonment, or neglect. See Florida Department of Children and Families, CF Operating Procedure No. 170-5.

²⁷ Florida Department of Children and Families, Agency Analysis of HB 1105, on file with Children, Families, and Seniors Subcommittee.

²⁸ *Id.*

required to notify dependency court judges of verified findings, which notice is made during six-month judicial review hearings. If a child protective investigation does not verify abuse, abandonment or neglect, current law does not require case managers and DCF attorneys to notify the court of the hotline report, even if the court has protective oversight.

Child Protective Investigations

A child protective investigation must be commenced immediately or within 24 hours after a hotline report is received, depending on the nature of the allegation.²⁹ The child protective investigator (CPI) assesses the safety and perceived needs of the child and family, and if services are needed, whether the child should receive in-home or out-of-home services.

A CPI is required to offer services for voluntary acceptance, even if the CPI determines the child is unsafe, unless there are high-risk factors that may impact the ability of the parents or legal custodians to exercise judgment, or there is a high likelihood of lack of compliance with voluntary services.³⁰ When the parent accepts voluntary services offered by DCF, the dependency court does not have court oversight of the family. When the child is unsafe and remains in the home without court oversight, DCF must implement a safety plan for the child and the CBC makes sure the family receives needed services.

Safety Methodology

In 2013, DCF began using a new child welfare practice model (model) that standardized the approach to making safety decisions and risk assessments for children.³¹ The model seeks the goals of safety, permanency, and child and family well-being.³² The model emphasizes parent engagement and empowerment as well as training and support of child welfare professionals to assess child safety.³³

To further implement this model, in 2014 the Legislature required CPIs to implement in-home safety plans to ensure the child's safety while the child remains in the home or is returned home after an out-of-home placement.³⁴ A safety plan controls and manages danger threats to a child when a parent is unavailable, unable, or unwilling to protect his or her child.³⁵ In-home safety plans must be specific, sufficient, feasible and sustainable to ensure child safety while the child remains in the home.³⁶ It may include tasks or responsibilities for a parent, caregiver, or legal custodian.

A safety plan may be used in several situations, such as when:

- the child remains in the home while the child protective investigation is underway;
- the child remains in the home after abuse or neglect is verified, but the parent accepts services voluntarily;
- the child has been placed in the home by the court instead of being sheltered out of home after the parent is found to have neglected or abused the child; and
- the child is reunified with the parent by the court after being in out-of-home care before the parent has completed his or her case plan or demonstrated that he or she has developed the protective capacities necessary to keep the child safe without a safety plan.

When the safety plan is for a child during a child protective investigation, the CPI works with the CBC to develop the safety plan and identify services necessary for the successful implementation of the plan.

²⁹ S. 39.301(1), F.S.

³⁰ S. 39.301(14), F.S.

³¹ Florida Department of Children and Families, *2013 Year in Review*, <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/admin/publications/year-in-review/2013/page19.shtml> (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

³² Florida Department of Children and Families, *Florida's Child Welfare Practice Model*, <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/child-welfare/child-welfare-practice-model.shtml> (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ S. 39.301(9)(a)6.a., F.S.

³⁵ Florida Department of Children and Families, CF Operating Procedure No. 170-7.

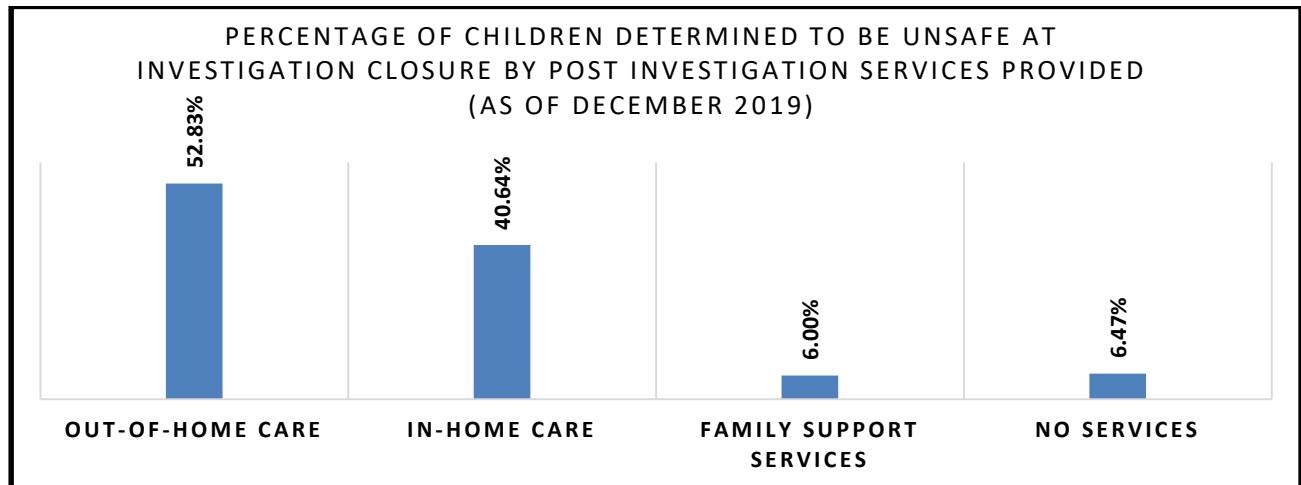
³⁶ S. 39.301(9)(a)6.a., F.S.

The CPI monitors the plan to ensure the child's safety until the CPI transfers the case to the CBC to monitor the plan's implementation.³⁷

In cases involving an in-home safety plan where there is no court involvement, the CBC case manager over the child's case must request a staffing with a DCF attorney to determine legal actions necessary when the in-home safety plan is no longer protecting the child or the parent is not demonstrating efforts to achieve outcomes that address the child's need for safety.³⁸ DCF is authorized to file a shelter or dependency petition on a family when the safety plan is no longer sufficient to keep the child safe, but there are currently no statutory timeframes for filing either petition.³⁹

When there is court involvement and a safety plan has been implemented, the court retains jurisdiction to review the status of the child for at least six months after the child is reunified with a parent.⁴⁰ Currently, it is in the court's discretion when to terminate judicial oversight of the child after retaining jurisdiction for at least six months after reunification. The court can terminate oversight even if a safety plan is in place to protect the child, even though the child welfare safety model contemplates the court retaining jurisdiction as long as a safety plan is in place to protect the child.⁴¹

The graph below shows the percentage of children, as of December 2019, determined to be unsafe and provided services out of the home compared with those receiving services either in the home or through family support services, which are offered to families on a voluntary basis.⁴² Additionally, the graph shows the percentage of children who did not receive services after an investigation.⁴³ This indicates about half of children determined unsafe are remaining in the parent's home at case closure.



Case Plans

Pursuant to s. 39.6011, F.S., DCF must prepare a case plan for each child receiving services. The case plan must be developed in a face-to-face conference with the child's parent, any court-appointed Guardian ad Litem, and, if appropriate, the child and the temporary custodian of the child.

Each case plan must contain:

- The problem being addressed, including the parent's behavior or acts resulting in risk to the child and the reason for the intervention by DCF.

³⁷ S. 39.301(9)(a)6.c., F.S.

³⁸ *Supra* note 28.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ S. 39.701, F.S.

⁴¹ *Supra* note 27.

⁴² Florida Department of Children and Families, *Child Welfare Key Indicators Monthly Report*, (Dec. 2019), available at http://www.centerforchildwelfare.org/ga/cwkeyindicator/KI_Monthly_Report_December_2019.pdf (last visited Jan. 13, 2020).

⁴³ *Id.*

- The permanency goal.
- If concurrent planning is being used, a goal of reunification in addition to one of the remaining permanency goals provided in statute.
- The date the case plan compliance expires. The case plan must be limited to as short a period as possible for accomplishing its provisions. The plan's compliance period expires no later than 12 months after the date the child was removed from the home, the child was adjudicated dependent, or the date the case plan was accepted by the court, whichever occurs first.
- A written notice to the parent that failure to substantially comply with the case plan may result in the termination of parental rights, and that a material breach of the case plan may result in the filing of a petition for termination of parental rights sooner than the compliance period set forth in the case plan.⁴⁴

Additionally, the case plan must describe:

- The role of foster parents or legal custodians when developing the services for the child, foster parents, or legal custodians;
- The responsibility of the case manager to forward a relative's request to receive notification of all proceedings and hearings;
- The minimum number of face-to-face meetings to be held each month between the parents and DCF to review the progress of the case plan, to eliminate barriers to progress, and to resolve conflicts or disagreements; and
- The parent's responsibility for financial support of the child.⁴⁵

All parties must sign the case plan, including the child, unless the child is not of an age or capacity to participate in the case-planning process. Signing the case plan acknowledges that individuals have participated in developing the terms and conditions.⁴⁶

Reunification

Federal law requires states to show, except in certain circumstances such as where the parent committed an especially egregious act, that they have made "reasonable efforts" to provide services to prevent a child's removal or to reunify a child with his or her family prior to termination of parental rights.⁴⁷ This federal requirement makes reunification a key goal for children placed in out-of-home care. Additionally, reunification is the primary permanency goal under Florida law.⁴⁸ Throughout the dependency process, if a child is in out-of-home care, the court reviews the parent's case to determine when reunification is safe for the child.

The court decides at a disposition meeting whether a child should receive services in-home or out-of-home.⁴⁹ If the court places a child out-of-home at disposition, the court can reunify the child with the parent postdisposition if it determines the circumstances that caused the out-of-home placement have been remedied to the extent that returning the child home with an in-home safety plan will not be detrimental to the child.⁵⁰ However, if the court does not place a child in out-of-home care at disposition, there is currently no specific mechanism or guidelines in statute for the court to place a child in out-of-home care at postdisposition if the court finds the child is not safe. If the court needs to place a child in out-of-home care after allowing the child to remain home at disposition, it would have to schedule a shelter hearing.

Foster Parents

⁴⁴ S. 39.6011(2), F.S.

⁴⁵ S. 39.6011(4), F.S.

⁴⁶ S. 39.6011(3), F.S.

⁴⁷ Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Public L. No. 96-272, H.R. 3434, 96th Cong. (1980).

⁴⁸ S. 39.621(3)(a), F.S.

⁴⁹ S. 39.01(25), F.S.

⁵⁰ S. 39.522(2), F.S.

Children receiving care out-of-home can be placed with foster parents licensed through CBCs or their subcontractors. As part of the licensure process, all prospective caregivers must complete criminal background checks before a child is placed in their care.⁵¹ The licensure process typically takes 100 days to complete and DCF rules⁵² provide specific timeframes with which CBCs and subcontracts must comply; however, current law does not specify these timeframes. As of November 2018, there were 5,358 foster parents licensed in Florida, and as of November 2019, 7,738 children were in licensed foster care.⁵³

Foster parents care for the children placed in their home and serve as role models for the biological parents working to reunify with their children. To qualify as a potential foster parent, applicants must go through a rigorous interview process, complete a training program, and participate in a home inspection and background check.⁵⁴ Foster parents are expected to:⁵⁵

- Provide parenting that consists of a loving commitment to the child and the child's safety and wellbeing;
- Provide opportunities to develop the child's interests and skills;
- Care for the child in light of the child's culture, religion, ethnicity, special physical or psychological needs and unique situations;
- Assist the biological parents in improving their ability to care for and protect their children and to provide continuity for the child;
- Assist the child in visitation and other forms of communication with his or her biological family;
- Obtain and maintain records that are important to the child's well-being, such as medical records and records of achievements;
- Advocate for children in their care with the child welfare system, the court, and community agencies, such as schools, child care, and health providers;
- Participate fully in the child's medical, psychological, and dental care as they would for their biological child; and
- Support the child's school success by participating in school activities and meetings.

Quality Parenting Initiative

The Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), a strategy of the Youth Law Center in California, is an approach to strengthening foster care, focused on improving foster parenting for all children in the child welfare system. It was launched in 2008 in Florida, and as of 2018, over 75 jurisdictions in 10 states have adopted the QPI approach.⁵⁶

When parents cannot care for their children, a foster parent or other caregiver must be able to provide loving, committed, and skilled care that the child needs, in partnership with the system, to ensure that children thrive. QPI was developed to ensure that every child removed from his or her home because of abuse, abandonment, or neglect is cared for by a foster family that provides skilled, nurturing parenting while helping the child maintain connections with his or her family.

In 2013, the Legislature enacted some of the basic principles of quality parenting in s. 409.145(2), F.S., including roles and responsibilities for caregivers, DCF, CBCs, and other agency staff to work together for children in out-of-home care.⁵⁷

⁵¹ S. 39.0138, F.S.

⁵² R. 65-13.025, F.A.C.

⁵³ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Children & Young Adults in Out-of-Home Care – Statewide*, <https://www.myflfamilies.com/programs/childwelfare/dashboard/c-in-ooh.shtml> (last visited Jan. 20, 2020).

⁵⁴ Florida Department of Children and Families, *How Do I Become a Foster Parent?*, <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/service-programs/foster-care/how-do-i.shtml> (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

⁵⁵ Florida Department of Children and Families, *Partnership Plan for Children in Out-of-Home Care*, available at <http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/OOHPublications/PartnershipPlan.pdf> (last visited Jan. 14, 2020).

⁵⁶ QPI Florida, Quality Parenting Initiative, *Just in Time Training*, <http://www.qpiflorida.org/about.html> (last visited Jan. 20, 2020).

⁵⁷ S. 409.145, F.S.

Foster parents receive a “Partnership Plan for Children in Out-of-Home Care” (Plan) during the initial foster parent licensing process to inform them of their roles and responsibilities for quality parenting.⁵⁸ The Plan outlines the values, principles and relationships between DCF, CBCs, and caregivers, like foster parents, in fulfilling their responsibilities to care for children in out-of-home care.

Child Welfare System Adoptions

Adoption is a method of achieving permanency for children who have suffered abuse, abandonment or neglect and who are unable to be reunited with their parents. Research indicates that children generally have better outcomes through adoption than through placement in long-term foster care.⁵⁹

To become a licensed adoptive parent and considered by DCF as an appropriate placement for a prospective adoptive minor in DCF’s custody, an individual or couple must complete an orientation session, a training program, a background check and a home study.⁶⁰ The typical time for to complete the process is less than nine months, and the process with specific time frames is included in DCF’s rule⁶¹; however, current law does not provide a process with set time frames.⁶²

Effect of the Bill

HB 1105 amends various sections in Ch. 39, F.S., to address the interaction of placement stability with child safety and permanency.

Dependency Court

Judicial Training

The bill requires the Florida Court Education Council (FCEC) to establish standards for instruction of circuit court judges regarding the benefits of a secure attachment with a primary caregiver, the importance of a stable placement, and the impact of trauma on child development. The FCEC shall provide such instruction on a periodic and timely basis.

Although new judges currently receive some training on the dependency process, this would ensure statewide consistent understanding of the importance of stable and permanent placements for children in the child welfare system.

Early Childhood Courts

The bill creates s. 39.01304, F.S., to expressly authorize circuit courts to create early childhood court programs. The bill provides factors a circuit court may consider when creating an early childhood court program, including:

- Nonadversarial support of the therapeutic needs of the parent and child.
- A multidisciplinary team made up of key community stakeholders to work with the court to restructure the way the community responds to the needs of abused or neglected children.
- A community coordinator to facilitate services and resources for families, serve as a liaison between a multidisciplinary team and the judiciary, and manage data collection for program evaluation and accountability.

⁵⁸ R. 65C-13.025(4)(k).

⁵⁹ Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, *Keeping the Promise: Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed*, Oct. 2010, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Florida Department of Children and Families, *How Do I Become a Foster Parent?*, <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/foster-care/how-do-i.shtml> (last visited Oct. 22, 2019).

⁶¹ R. 65C-16.004 and 65C-16.005, F.A.C.

⁶² Florida Department of Children and Families, *Frequently Asked Questions*, <http://www.adoptflorida.org/faq.shtml> (last visited Oct. 22, 2019).

- A continuum of mental health services that includes those that support the parent-child relationship and are appropriate for the children and family served.

The bill allows the Office of State Courts Administrator (OSCA) to coordinate with each participating circuit court to fill a community coordinator position for the circuit's early childhood court program, subject to appropriations.

Further, the bill requires OSCA to contract for the evaluation of the programs to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity of a program's evidence-based treatment. OSCA may also provide, or contract for the provision of, training and technical assistance related to program services, consultation and guidance for difficult cases, and ongoing training for court teams.

Although circuit courts currently set up early childhood courts, at their discretion, the bill may improve consistency and quality by requiring all courts to consider the same best practices and authorizing coordinators and OSCA supports.

Placement Changes

Current law does not provide guidance to courts when it is determining whether a change of placement for a child would be in his or her best interest. HB 1105 amends s. 39.522, F.S., relating to postdisposition change of custody, to provide this guidance.

The bill requires courts to consider certain factors when determining whether a change of legal custody or placement is in the child's best interest. This will ensure judges are considering all relevant factors on a consistent basis when determining what is in the child's best interest during a dependency court proceeding. The bill adds the following factors to s. 39.522:

- The child's age.
- The physical, mental, and emotional health benefits to the child by remaining in his or her current placement or moving to the proposed placement.
- The stability and longevity of the child's current placement.
- The established bonded relationship between the child and the current or proposed caregiver.
- The reasonable preference of the child, if the court has found that the child is of sufficient intelligence, understanding, and experience to express a preference.
- The recommendation of the child's current caregiver.
- The recommendation of the child's guardian ad litem, if one has been appointed.
- The child's previous and current relationship with a sibling, if the change of legal custody or placement will separate or reunite siblings.
- The likelihood of the child attaining permanency in the current or proposed placement.

The bill also addresses the lack of statutory guidance to courts when determining, at postdisposition, whether to place a child in out-of-home care when the child is living at home with his or her parents with an in-home safety plan. The bill requires courts to consider the following factors, created in s. 39.522(4):

- The circumstances that caused the child's dependency and other subsequently identified issues.
- The length of time the child has been placed in the home with an in-home safety plan.
- The parent's or caregiver's current level of protective capacities.
- The level of increase, if any, in the parent's or caregiver's protective capacities since the child's placement in the home based on the length of time the child has been placed there.

This creates a mechanism for the court to remove a child from an unsafe home without requiring another shelter hearing when the child is already under the jurisdiction of the court. It will also ensure judges are considering relevant factors on a consistent basis when determining whether to remove a child from the home at postdisposition.

Further, the bill requires the court to evaluate the child's permanency goal in each change of placement or removal and requires the court to change the goal if doing so is in the best interest of the child. This will ensure that when a court changes a child's placement, or removes the child from his or home, the permanency goal in the case plan reflects what is in the child's best interest to reach long-term permanency.

Dependency System Process

Central Abuse Hotline

The bill requires DCF to notify the court when a hotline report is accepted for an investigation, if the report involves a child over whom the court has jurisdiction. Currently, DCF must notify the court only of reports that produce verified findings after an investigation. The bill changes this by requiring DCF to notify the court of reports that are accepted for an investigation because the allegations meet the statutory definition of abuse, abandonment, or neglect, and the report involves a child whom the court has jurisdiction. This will give a dependency court judge more information on a family for which it has protective oversight to make more informed decisions to protect the child's health and well-being.

Safety Methodology

The bill amends s. 39.301(9)(a)6., F.S., to allow DCF to file a shelter or dependency petition to initiate court jurisdiction when the family is receiving services from a CBC without judicial oversight. DCF may file a petition if the child has an in-home safety plan and the parent or caregiver has not sufficiently increased his or her protective capacities within 90 days after the CPI transfers the child's case to the CBC. This will provide an incentive for family engagement in voluntary services so children can eventually be safe at home without the use of an in-home safety plan.

The bill amends s. 39.701(1)(b), F.S., to prohibit the court from terminating jurisdiction over a child if the child is placed in a home with a parent or caregiver with an in-home safety plan and the safety plan remains necessary for the child to reside safely in the home. This is consistent with DCF practice and Florida's Safety Methodology. However, judges are not bound by the same standards unless it is in statute or expressed in court rules.

Case Plans

The bill requires case managers to specify in case plans the responsibility of parents and caregivers to work together to successfully implement the case plan. It also requires case managers to specify in the case plan how the case manager will assist parents and caregivers in developing a productive relationship, including meaningful communication and mutual support. The case plan must also describe the parent's or caregiver's ability to notify the court or the case manager if ineffective communication takes place that negatively impacts the child. The bill also requires case managers to resolve conflicts or disagreements between parents and caregivers, service providers, or any professional assisting the parents in completion of the case plan.

The bill requires the case manager to include a statement from a foster parent or legal custodian regarding the well-being of the child, the impact of any services provided to the child, and the working relationship between the caregiver and the parent in the report for judicial review hearings. It also requires the court to determine at judicial reviews hearings whether the parents and caregivers have developed a productive relationship that includes meaningful communication and mutual support.

Foster Parents

The bill amends various statutes to promote a good working relationship between foster parents and biological parents that includes meaningful communication and mutual support and requires the court to review the relationship at judicial review hearings.

Quality Parenting and Parenting Partnerships

The bill makes current law requirements for quality parenting applicable to all out-of-home caregivers, instead of only to foster parents. The bill creates s. 409.1415, F.S., which directs DCF and CBCs to support relationships between foster families and biological parents of children in out-of-home care by:

- Facilitating telephone communication between the foster parent and the birth or legal parent as soon as possible after the child is placed in the home.
- Facilitating and attending an in-person meeting between the foster parent and the birth or legal parent within two weeks after placement.
- Developing and supporting a plan for the birth or legal parents to participate in medical appointments, educational and extra-curricular activities, and other events involving the child.
- Facilitating participation by the foster parent in visitation between the birth parent and child.
- Involving the foster parent in planning meetings with the birth parent.
- Developing and implementing effective transition plans for the child's return home or placement in any other living environment.
- Supporting continued contact between the foster family and the child after the child returns home or moves to another permanent living arrangement.
- Supporting continued connection with the birth parent after adoption.

This language provides more guidance for how biological parents and caregivers, like foster parents, must work together and how CBCs must support them.

Further, the bill amends s. 39.701(2)(a)7, F.S., to require the judicial review report to contain the caregiver's recommendations for an expansion or restriction on future visitations with the birth or legal parent. This will allow caregivers to have additional input regarding the child's safety at judicial review hearings.

Family Foster Home Licensure

The bill amends s. 409.175, F.S., to require DCF or its subcontractor to complete a licensing home study within 30 days after initiation. Further, DCF must approve or deny a family foster home licensure application within 10 days after receipt of the complete application. DCF must approve or deny the complete application no later than 100 calendar days after the prospective foster family completes orientation. The bill allows DCF to exceed the 100 calendar days if additional certifications for a license are required. This change is intended to speed up the family foster home licensure process so DCF can place children in stable homes faster.

Child Welfare System Adoptions

The bill amends s. 63.092, F.S., to require a CBC or its subcontracted agency to complete a preliminary home study for identified prospective adoptive minors in DCF's custody within 30 days of initiation. Preliminary home studies determine the suitability of the intended adoptive parents and must be completed before a child is placed in an intended adoptive home. This change may place minors up for adoption in prospective adoptive homes more quickly.

The bill creates a process in statute and requires DCF, CBCs or subcontracted agencies to comply with specific timeframes when someone is interested in adopting a child from the child welfare system. Specifically, the bill requires:

- DCF, CBCs or subcontracted agencies to respond to an initial inquiry from a prospective adoptive parent within seven business days after receipt of the inquiry. Further, the response

must inform the prospective adoptive parent of the adoption process and the requirements for adopting a child from the child welfare system.

- DCF, CBCs or subcontracted agencies to refer all prospective adoptive parents to a DCF-approved adoptive parent training program.
- All prospective adoptive parents to complete a DCF-approved adoptive parent training program, unless the prospective adoptive parent is a licensed foster parent, or relative or nonrelative caregiver, who has attended the training program within the last five years, or has had the child placed in their care for six months or longer and determined to understand the challenges and skills needed to parent the child.
- A prospective adoptive parent to complete an adoption application created by DCF.
- CBCs or subcontracted agencies to complete an adoptive home study of a prospective adoptive parent that includes observation, screening, and evaluation of the child and the prospective adoptive parent before a child is placed in the adoptive home. Approved adoptive home studies will be valid for 12 months after the approval date.
- CBCs or subcontracted agencies to complete a preparation process, as established by DCF rule, with the prospective adoptive parent.
- A decision about the prospective adoptive parent's appropriateness to adopt at the conclusion of the adoptive home study and preparation process and include the final recommendation in the adoptive home study. If the recommendation is for approval, the application must be submitted to the CBC or its subcontract agency. The CBC or its subcontracted agency must approve the home study within 14 business days after receipt of the recommendation.

The bill provides that this process does not apply to private adoptions outside the child welfare system.

These changes are likely to speed up the adoption process for children in the child welfare system by getting prospective adoptive parents approved more quickly so they will be available to adopt a child.

Community-Based Care Services

The bill amends s. 409.988(1)(j), F.S., to allow a CBC to exceed the 35 percent limit on providing direct care services to children and families in its circuit, if approved by the court to do so. The lead agency must provide a justification of need to stakeholders to exceed the threshold. Stakeholders will review the justification of need and recommend to DCF whether it should approve or deny the request.

The bill amends various statutes to conform cross references to changes in the bill.

The bill will take effect July 1, 2020.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

Indeterminate. See Fiscal Comments.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

None.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

The State Court System indicates the bill's changes have an indeterminate fiscal impact. The bill requires DCF to notify the court of reports to the hotline that involve a child whose care is under jurisdiction of the court. This may increase judicial workload as additional hearings are conducted when a court is notified of such reports. Additionally, the bill amends factors a court is required to consider when evaluating a change in a child's custody or placement, which would also negatively impact working.

The FY 2020-21 GAA provides funding for OSCA to contract for an evaluation of early childhood court programs to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity of the programs' evidence-based treatment and hire a statewide training specialist to provide training to court teams participating in the early childhood court program.⁶³ Additionally, the GAA provides funding to participating trial courts to hire community coordinators.⁶⁴ The bill's provisions authorize OSCA to coordinate with participating circuit courts to fill community coordinator positions for the circuit's early childhood court.

⁶³ 2020, HB 5001, General Appropriations Act, specific appropriations 3398, 3200, 3203, and 3208 provides \$333,951 in recurring funds and \$3,940 in nonrecurring funds to OSCA to hire a statewide training specialist to provide training to court teams participating in early childhood courts and to contract for an evaluation of the early childhood court programs to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity of the programs' evidence-based treatment.

⁶⁴ 2020, HB 5001, General Appropriations Act, specific appropriations 3222, 3224, and 3236 provides \$1,864,719 in recurring funds and \$47,080 in nonrecurring funds to the trial courts to be used for community coordinators for early childhood courts.